

Bodies at the Vanishing Point: doublethink and Ann Shelton's Evental Photographic Constructions

Dorita Hannah and John Di Stefano

In the 1971 road movie *Vanishing Point*, the protagonist Kowalski drives across the American landscape, pursued by 'the law', towards his inevitable death. The endless passing of the highway's dividing lines recalls the ominous ever-forward movement of a later, more foreboding film, David Lynch's *Lost Highway*, 1997. In both projects, the fragile body is projected towards annihilation.

Ann Shelton's images of New Zealand landscapes are haunted by bodies located at the vanishing point of a curious scenographic construction, often heightened by her techniques of doubling through mirroring. These dark pastorals challenge the enduring fabrication of Aotearoa New Zealand as a bucolic '100% pure' idyll consistently ranked as one of the world's safest nations. Yet in this country, with its polluted waterways, eroded landscapes and an alarmingly high rate of male suicides, you can go for a walk along bush tracks and never return. Shelton's 'Scapes' series – *Public Places*, 2001–03, *A ride in darkness / Wastelands*, 2010, and *a kind of sleep*, 2004 – mark sites that have witnessed trauma and disaster, yet are absent of the bodies implicated in these scenes. They are testaments to an underlying presence of violence and crime (real and imagined, historical and mythical) that troubles New Zealand's standing within the global imaginary. Focusing on narratives of failure rather than progress, her ambivalent images speak of dark stories and dirty secrets.

In 2014, Shelton brought one of these buried narratives into the daylight of Taranaki's State Highway 3 as it passes through the town of Midhirst, with a photographic work entitled *doublethink* 'We have maintained a silence closely resembling stupidity' Neil Roberts 1982. Consisting of eight photographic panels, each 1884 x 841 mm, *doublethink* was installed on the road traversing this small town where 'punk anarchist', 22-year-old Neil Roberts, stayed in the months leading up to his attempt to bomb the 'Wanganui computer', the facility housing the New Zealand Police's centralised national database, on 13 November 1982. The eight panels each depict words – traced by sparklers in the darkness – that together make up the phrase 'We have maintained a silence closely resembling stupidity',¹ a slogan that Roberts wrote on the wall of a nearby public toilet before he detonated explosives that damaged the building's entrance and killed him, rendering his dismembered body unrecognisable.

Extending the idea that *doublethink* is 'a delicate kind of memorial to a person and an event',² we can also look to the performative nature of Shelton's photography, with specific reference to *doublethink* and its relation to Roberts's suicidal 'act'. The scenographic and evental aspects of her unsettling photography, which suggest movement, spatialisation and duration, rather than a static instant in time, were effectively and affectively transferred to a roadside installation as a cautionary tale in a post-Snowden era.

A Kind of Scenography

The term 'doublethink'³ encourages us to think and look again and, as Meredith Robertshawe remarks, is related to Shelton's use of twinned and mirrored images in her earlier work.⁴ Through doubling, Shelton bestows symmetry on asymmetric environments. Her photographs link to the theatrical notion of scenography, principally via a strange perspectival construction in which the vanishing point is either doubled on either side and out of frame (as two-point perspective) and/or lies centrally within the thin white dividing line bifurcating paired images (as one-point perspective).

Scenography – conventionally aligned with theatre as the art of scenic design – was first referred to by Aristotle as *skenographia* in *Poetics*, a 'scenic writing' associated with stage painting, and was later described by Vitruvius in Book I.2 of *De Architectura* as *scaenographia*, or the representational art of perspective. In 1545, the Renaissance architect Sebastiano Serlio utilised *scenografia* as a means of integrating the science and craft of architecture, scenery and painting into a combined stage and auditorium, which in turn influenced the planning of buildings, cities and landscapes. He proposed three 'scenes': tragic (urban); comic (suburban) and pastoral (rural), defining the latter as a woodland scene of trees and huts with a central pathway maintaining the singular perspective. As Allen S Weiss contends, this spatial continuum via geometric projection is dependent on a horizon line and vanishing point where 'infinity, aesthetics, mathematics and theology meet on a unified plane'.⁵

In *a kind of sleep*, Shelton's doubled landscapes are rendered perspectival through lines constructed by human intervention – a gashed road in *Sleeper, Lucy's Gully, South Taranaki*, 2004; an abandoned building in *Villa #11, formerly Lake Alice Hospital, Wanganui*, 2004, and the mowed field of *Arena, Te Ngutu o te Manu, Beak of the Bird, South Taranaki*, 2004 – or through a powerful landscape made more spe(cta)cular by the erosion of human intervention – the gaping hole of *Vault, Lovers' Leap, Otago Peninsula*, 2003 or the view from a paddock towards the crease of a steep, distant valley in *Theatre, Uruti Valley, Taranaki*, 2004.

Anna Sanderson's essay on Shelton's *a kind of sleep* series refers specifically to *Theatre*, in which:

[i]t looks like a set, with a flat of tussocky grass as stage and a backdrop of dark green bush. Light hits dark bush in a sheeny dusty way, the way it might hit silk or blonde hair. If I walked straight over the tussocky paddock towards that bush and the vanishing point, I would find a little opening in the trees which would bend off to the left. A path may continue into the valley.⁶

Regarding the perspectival doubling above and below ground, Sanderson asks, 'what does it do?' This question focuses on the work's inherent performativity, querying not what images describe but what they *perform*. Akin to JL Austin's 'speech acts',⁷ when something is enacted through its saying, the photograph is rendered active (performative) rather than descriptive (constative). Sanderson writes that the pre-doubled image 'singly presents a perspectival world which seems enchanting, but in a certain way comprehensible'.⁸ This intelligibility of the original, which secures the unstable landscape through the vanishing point, is then troubled by the double. Theatre itself has generally done away with perspectival assembled stage images, foreclosing, as Shelton's work does, on full comprehensibility, recognising Foucault's reference to the vanishing point as the 'essential void'.⁹ This withholding undermines the hitherto rational, stable and homogenous space of Cartesian thinking, which assumed the sovereignty of vision through a single immobile eye and the mathematisation of psychophysiological space.¹⁰ Shelton's perspectival twinned landscapes in *a kind of sleep* therefore formulate *a kind of scenography* that troubles the vanishing point and reveals the 'existential void' in the New Zealand psyche.¹¹

The uncanny effect of Shelton's doubling tends to be dictated by the perspectival construction suggested by her singular, originary image. Her use of doubling and mirroring

3 'Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them', George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1949.

4 Meredith Robertshawe, *Ann Shelton: doublethink*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 2013.

5 Allen S Weiss, *Mirrors of Infinity: The French Formal Garden and 17th-Century Metaphysics*, Princeton Architectural Press, Princeton NJ, 1996, p 59.

6 Anna Sanderson, 'In the Valley of the Shadow', in *A Kind of Sleep*, ed Greg Burke, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 2005, p 11.

7 JL Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1975.

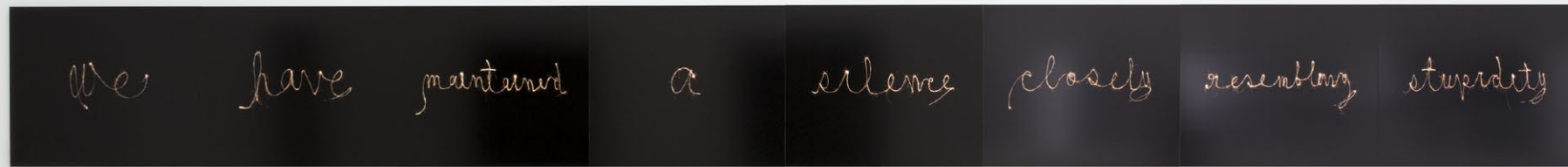
8 Sanderson, 'In the Valley of the Shadow', p 11.

9 In his essay on *Las Meninas*, Michel Foucault refers to the vanishing point as the 'essential void', Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Pantheon, New York, 1971, p 16.

11 Dr Shyamala Nada-Raja refers to New Zealand's 'existential void' when discussing issues about the country's alarming suicide rates, begging the questions: 'Who are we as a country, who are we as a people, what is our purpose and meaning?' Cited by Eleanor Ainge Roy, "'We have to start talking about it': New Zealand Suicide Rates Hit Record High", *Guardian*, 19 October 2015.

1 Translated proclamation from the revolutionary Junta Tuitiva of La Paz in 1809, which fought against the Spanish Crown for the freedom of what is present-day Bolivia.

2 Kyla McFarlane, 'We have maintained a silence closely resembling stupidity', <http://www.annshelton.com/texts-and-media/the-city-of-gold-and-lead-we-have-maintained>, 2013.



Anniversary, 'We have maintained a silence closely resembling stupidity' Neil Roberts 1982, installation view, Trish Clark Gallery. Photo: Sam Hartnett, courtesy Trish Clark Gallery.

is a technical and conceptual strategy that attempts a type of dissection of the singular photographic image as a means of mining it for further information and 'other' meanings by feeding it back onto itself. Through doubling and mirroring we get the sense of dissecting the monolithic and mono-perspectival frame, slicing through it to create another extended space and vantage point(s) from which to read the information recorded by the camera. Ontologically, the 'surplus' of photographic information generated through this doubling suggests that photography can push against its own visual limits, conventions and logic to open up new spaces of meaning. In works from the *Public Places* series, such as *Trespass (After Monster)*, *Daytona Beach, Florida, USA*, 2001, the perspectival doubling of the image forms lines that lead both away from and towards a centralised vanishing point, activating the image so that it folds back on itself to open up a larger horizontal symmetrical image, thus creating a new fictive site with, at times, uncanny results.

Trespass takes a track off the Florida highway, where serial killer Aileen Wuornos disposed of the first man she murdered, mirroring it to lead the eye in opposite directions towards distant vanishing points on either side of the image, and simultaneously transforming a roadside puddle into a centralised menacing pool with a further point of disappearance in the white breach between images. Such visual and conceptual strategies employed by Shelton in sites of crime, where bodies have been incarcerated, disappeared or violently dispatched, force the viewer to consider the notion of vanishing itself as a key element in her doubled photographic works. The vanishing point that is constructed, multiplied, occluded and looped back onto itself through mirroring becomes a key consideration in how Shelton 'thinks through' her use of photography. Such 'unvanishing' extends her work into the realm of the performative by asking the viewer to think and see beyond the traditional, causal and constative conventions of

photography. By simultaneously marking and refusing the vanishing point, she delineates and denies the limits of the photographic, asking us to also engage with the imaginary.

Refusing to Maintain Silence

Shelton also refuses to maintain silence regarding the dark events of New Zealand's past. Her work is distinguished by in-depth investigations into histories and mythologies of particular places, which enrich the understanding of her enigmatic imagery. This 'giving voice' to the multiple layers of local stories, which are long-buried, disavowed or necessarily invented, finds fact in fiction and fiction in fact. One such story is that of Neil Roberts, whose 'suicide bombing' occurred at the time when such 'acts' were beginning to make shockwaves on the global stage. Linked to the Middle East as an emerging 'tool of modern terrorist warfare',¹² Roberts's planned action occurred between the 1981 and 1983 attacks in the Lebanese civil war, which brought suicide bombings (now sadly ubiquitous) to international attention. Defined as 'involving explosives deliberately carried to the target either on the person or in a civilian vehicle and delivered by surprise',¹³ such events seem far away from New Zealand, although the country had just undergone violent divisions through the anti-Springbok tour riots of 1981, in which the New Zealand Police and the Security Intelligence Service conducted surveillance and undercover operations that, in turn, led to increased police autonomy and use of domestic intelligence after the protests abated. Such state scrutiny was encapsulated in the spectral presence of the 'Wanganui computer' that was commissioned in 1976 as the National Law Enforcement System, New Zealand's crime database. For Roberts, this building and what it housed – operating within a system of increasing surveillance – represented state tyranny and became the

¹² Noah Feldman: 'Islam, Terror and the Second Nuclear Age', *New York Times*, 29 October 2006.

¹³ Michael B Kraft and Edward Marks, *U.S. Government Counterterrorism: A Guide to Who Does What*, CRC Press, Boca Raton FL, 2011, p 14.

Sleeper, Lucy's Gully, South Taranaki, 2004.



target of his commitment to 'anarchy' and 'peace-thinking', linked terms he also scrawled in his protest on the public toilet wall. Two years before George Orwell's fated 1984, Roberts's attack against 'Big Brother' constituted its own 'doublethink,' described by Orwell as 'the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them'.

Shelton's *doublethink* is an iteration of a 2013 gallery-based work entitled *Anniversary*, 'We have maintained a silence closely resembling stupidity' Neil Roberts 1982, which consisted of eight pigment prints, each 604 x 755 mm, mounted as a grid and marked three decades since Roberts's death. With *doublethink* Shelton transposes the images of *Anniversary* from the gallery wall into the civic realm of a motorway, conceptually marking a significant shift in the work by reactivating it through spatial and performative considerations. Installing the work on the road that Roberts would have travelled on his way to the bombing site in Whanganui serves as a means of retracing and literally marking that space as social and political. Shelton also signposts it as historical. The panels, which at once recall and transgress roadside signage, function as a type of public intervention that makes present an invisible history: giving voice to the silenced.

As a documentary strategy, Shelton challenges traditional conventions of photographic representation by engaging with performative modes of re-enactment. Here, the eight sequentially installed panels activate the photographic spatio-temporal by acting as – or enacting – a type of echo emanating from the public toilet where Roberts's graffitied statement has long been painted over. Utilising the advertising technique of placing billboards sequentially to create a witty phrase with punchline, Shelton's panels slowly re-form the words (and sentiments) of a phrase from the revolutionary Junta Tuitiva of La Paz borrowed by the anarchist Roberts. However, here the punchline is left hanging in the direction of Whanganui, where the computer has long been decommissioned, its cumulative contents dispersed across multiple sites in New Zealand and moved from a solid building to networks of ephemeral data.

Ontologically, these photographic works are themselves passing, fleeting, vanishing. Each of the eight panels depicts one of the words from Roberts's phrase, 'written' with sparklers in the night. Rather than document a place, person or any existing object, these eight photographic exposures record a fleeting act of writing words 'in thin air'. The images that trace Roberts's critique of his country's ennui in the face of increasing surveillance also record the moment of Shelton's act of making. The referent no longer exists. Recalling scenography as 'scenic writing', her physical 'writing with light' has expired, existing now only as a trace recorded by the camera. This idea of an insubstantial image resonates with the



Theatre, Uruti Valley, Taranaki, 2004.

We

We have maintained a silence closely resembling stupidity - Neil Roberts, 1982

have

maintained

PASSING
LANE
400 m
AHEAD



SCHOOL

doublethink 'We have maintained a
silence closely resembling stupidity'
Neil Roberts, 1982. Installation view,
Midhurst, Taranaki. Photo: Bryan James,
courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

instability of photography’s veracity and of the vanishing nature of bodies and events. By literally signposting these intangible (but nevertheless very real) thoughts as insubstantial images captured photographically, Shelton creates an unexpected and provocative visual and temporal space where a historically buried and silenced voice can ‘take place’. She refuses to maintain the silence to which Roberts alluded: one that will not protect us and, eventually, will betray us.

Also important to note is the way in which Roberts’s phrase unfolds through *doublethink*. Unlike its earlier gallery version installed as a grid, the outdoor version is arranged sequentially over a length of motorway. Designed to be ‘read’ from a moving car, the phrase is apprehended one panel at a time along the trajectory. In this way, the work is imbedded both spatially and temporally as a type of eight-frame animation activated by movement itself. Indeed, one might re-view and re-member the words even after we have passed them by, and in this way the durational signature of the panels may continue to linger and ‘visualise’ long after they’ve been encountered. To describe this photographic work as performative is obvious since the panels engage with each other over time and space. But this work is performative also in the sense that it has the potential to linger in the mind even after it has been seen, linked to the sparklers’ fleeting life.

After the Event and Towards the Event Horizon

Less than two weeks before Roberts made sure ‘this punk won’t see 23’,¹⁴ New Zealanders had celebrated Guy Fawkes Night, 5 November, lighting bonfires, setting off fireworks and waving sparklers: generally oblivious to the origins of this annual event as ‘thanksgiving’¹⁵ for the failed Gunpowder Plot of 1605, which resulted in the execution of Guy Fawkes for his role in attempting to blow up London’s Houses of Parliament in order to assassinate King James I and his leaders. As we attempt to piece together a dismembered past, it is often the work of artists to remind us of historic events and of our own complicity in their making as both reality and fairy-tale. For Walter Benjamin, a ‘box in the ears’ is the most effective way to awaken the dreaming collective.¹⁶ With Ann Shelton, we emerge from our ‘kind of sleep’ through her particular brand of documentary as a re-telling of people and events, both factual and fictional, that either occupies the margins of, or is elided from, recorded history.

Focusing on the event itself as an unrecoverable moment in the political and visceral landscape, Shelton’s work, with its alliance to time, is ‘evental’. As a translation of événementielle, evental connotes something akin to the event but constituted as new and irruptive of the old.¹⁷ The inherently unrepresentable traumatic event of Roberts’s self-sacrifice constitutes a Lacanian ‘stain of the real’, described by Slavoj Žižek as the ‘hole in reality which designates the ultimate limit where “the word fails”’.¹⁸ It is, as Alenka Zupančič explains, a ‘borderline act’: ‘something completely different from “doing” or “action” [and] incorporates some radical no! to the universe which surrounds it and involves an irreducible moment of risk’.¹⁹ Zupančič points out that Lacan’s model of the *act* came from the act of suicide, when every real act is a ‘suicide of the subject’, allowing the subject to be born again as a new subject. This is aligned to the ontological unrepeatability of performance: things happen only once.

doublethink was installed on State Highway 3 only months after Edward Snowden blew the whistle on the USA’s National Security Agency and mass global surveillance. On 15 September 2014, Snowden was streamed live to Auckland’s Town Hall in an event called *The Moment of Truth* where he stated, ‘If you live in New Zealand, you are being watched’. Yet any claims of mass surveillance through an alliance with the Americans seem to be met with silence by the majority of New Zealanders, illustrating the ‘new normal’ in which crises – ecological, financial and political – have become a way of life and being tracked on- and offline is no longer questioned as aberrant. Just as the police and media characterised Roberts’s act as a misfit’s misguided gesture, the words of ‘whistleblowers’ such as Snowden, Julian Assange and Nicky Hager are too often framed as those of traitors, cranks and conspiracy theorists. Yet, in

puncturing the myth that our lives in Aotearoa New Zealand are safe and sound, they open up the vanishing point to reveal a gaping hole in reality and on the event horizon.

There is therefore something particularly resonant about the horizon in Shelton’s *doublethink*. Although a horizon line is implicit in this landscape installation, each frame (depicting a black void) is devoid of horizon line, leaving the motorway to provide that visual cue towards infinity. It is beyond the horizon on State Highway 3 that the bombing happened, a bombing Shelton does not image. Rather, she incorporates images leading up to the event (that is, the words on a toilet wall) to indicate the path to Roberts’s event horizon as a point of no return. Her choice to not focus on the event itself is significant and an integral part of Shelton’s conceptual strategy. It is a move *away* from the event while still being very much *about* the event. It focuses on the cause and the effect of an event, which is always more compelling than the incident itself because it sidesteps the sensationalism of the bombing and allows for more space to consider the human aspects and dimensions that surround it. To consider Roberts’s frame of mind prior to the bombing, and then to examine its aftermath,²⁰ creates two foci – or multiple perspectives – of the event. Akin to her doubled and mirrored works, *doublethink* attempts to create a ‘multi-perspectival’ image and discourse of an event, extending a singular linear and causal narrative and opening up other spaces from which to consider the historically marginalised.

Chased by ‘blue, blue meanies’²¹ in *Vanishing Point*, the counterculture figure of Kowalski represents a man who is acting according to his conscience against the status quo’s ingrained corruption and hurtling towards his own event horizon. His end, like Roberts’s, was violent, fiery and seemingly meaningless. Yet Ann Shelton’s temporary transformation of the Midhirst main street into a lost highway awakens a dormancy in the landscape and reveals the ever-present doublethink of an ever-new normal, suggesting that perhaps Roberts’s own ‘doublethink’ gesture of ‘anarchy’ and ‘peace-thinking’ has not completely vanished. ■

²⁰ Here we make reference specifically to the scholarship of David Campamy who, in his seminal essay ‘Safety in Numbness: Some Remarks on the Problems of “Late Photography”’ (first published in *Where is the Photograph?* ed David Green, Photoworks/Photoforum, Brighton, 2003) discusses the rise of ‘late’ or ‘aftermath’ photography, and asks questions about the ongoing role and relevancy of still photography in a world filled with more immediate means of imaging actuality. He proposes that the role of photography might be its ability to record the consequences of events after they have happened: their aftermath. His approach also stresses the latency inherent in events and their relationship to photographic images.

¹⁴ ‘This punk won’t see 23 – no future’ were the words found tattooed on the chest of Roberts’s dismembered body after the bombing.

¹⁵ The yearly celebration of Guy Fawkes emerged from the parliamentary **Observance of 5th November Act** 1605, also known as the ‘Thanksgiving Act’, which called for an annual thanksgiving for the failure of the Gunpowder Plot.

¹⁶ Susan Buck Morse, citing Benjamin’s retelling of ‘Sleeping Beauty’ in which the princess is awakened not by a kiss from Prince Charming but by the sound of the cook boxing the ears of the kitchen hand, in **The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project**, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1991, p 22.

¹⁷ Discussed by translator Peter Hallward in his introduction to Alain Badiou, **Ethics: An Understanding of Evil**, Verso, London/New York, 2001, pp xxxvi–lii.

¹⁷ Discussed by translator Peter Hallward in his introduction to Alain Badiou, **Ethics: An Understanding of Evil**, Verso, London/New York, 2001, pp xxxvi–lii.

¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, ‘In His Bold Gaze My Ruin is Writ Large’, in **Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)**, ed Slavoj Žižek, Verso, London/New York, 1992, p 239.

¹⁹ Alenka Zupančič. ‘A Perfect Place to Die: Theatre in Hitchcock Films’, in **Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan**, p 93.